The Flying Womb

Several occupational therapists and doctors have remarked that my chair is several sizes too big for me. "I like it that way," I reply. "It gives me more protection." Like the massive American cars of the seventies, it is heavy and its large frame and solid build afford me a safety both physical and psychological.

It also has a low center of gravity. In 1993, I was hit by a car (traveling at about twenty miles an hour) which made a right turn across the street I was crossing in Manhattan (I had the right of way; it was a crosswalk and the light was in my favor); Miraculously, the chair did not tip over and I escaped with a sprained left hand.

My chair is dark like the womb. I recently had it "souped up" to go faster. I like to be able to accelerate quickly to avoid obstacles: people, dogs, bicycles, which may suddenly appear in my path. It's as if I'm in a "flying womb," perhaps safer, because in the womb I broke many bones and even in the chair last year when I had a *grand mal* seizure, I broke my right hip, my left femur and left ankle, though mercifully I was unconscious at the time and it wasn't until later when I came to in the emergency room that I experienced the agony no yell is loud enough to alleviate, no painkiller strong enough to obliterate, which is familiar to all O.I.s.

I know my chair cannot protect me from possible death or terrible maiming because I have O.I., but having the illusion of protection gives me sufficient comfort and confidence to go about my everyday life with very little fear. Of course the womb I am in has an open front — people and objects can fall on top of me. I keep alert; I am my own seeing eye dog.

In dreams, I am never walking, I am always flying, or rather, floating at about most "walking people's" waist level, the level I am at in my motorized wheelchair. I first got around in a motorized chair when I came to this country and began attending classes at U.C. Davis. These chairs are so sensitive that a slight touch on the joystick will zoom you forward at an

alarming speed. I remember being terrified of driving off the sidewalk and plummeting into the gutter on campus when I first drove the chair.

Now I drive with confidence. The chair seems an extension of my body, a part of me. The walking people I know may greet me in the street, but often I don't acknowledge them because I am concentrating so hard, my eyes watching for every bump and crack in the sidewalk which, if I negotiate it badly, could tip me over and lead to many breaks, even death.

Driving the chair is an odd experience; on the one hand it's as serene as flying in a glider or a balloon, on the other as scary as driving a bumper car at breakneck speeds. If I'm in an angry mood, I wish I had a cow catcher on the front of the chair and could mow down pedestrians ahead of me, crush them, hear the snapping of their bones; then, I think, then they'd know what it's like to have brittle bones. Then they'd keep a safe distance from me, be more aware.

On the subway, walking people often act oblivious to the chair. I want to crush them, then they'd be aware, I snarl to myself. I feel a lot of frustration, but it isn't the frustration of a person who can't walk and who wants to walk. If I'm late for an appointment, I don't want to <u>run</u> to my destination; rather I'd prefer to fly — to circumnavigate traffic, people, buildings, trees. I have a wheelchair that travels as fast as I'd like but I'd like to be free of it also. It is an implied insult to my freedom and yet it gives me freedom; it is my friend and my enemy.

It can never compensate for my short, weak legs, for my tiny body. Sometimes when I am lying down and see the chair parked next to the bed I want to take an ax to it. I envision a pile of twisted metal, snapped wheel-spokes, sagging slit tires gaping like the wounds of dead soldiers on the battlefield.

I am always moved by the sight of an empty wheelchair; I envision a miracle — some aged man or woman bent and trembling with a slow, progressive, terminal illness, leaping up healthy, middle-aged or young,

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flushed with life, not healed by any evangelist but by an act of God, the touch of an angel, an act of will on his or her own part; the empty chair looks forlorn to me, strangely hurt as if abandoned by a lover.

In Truman Capote's *Other Stories, Other Rooms,* Randolph says, and I paraphrase here, "All I ever wanted was to be held and told that everything will be alright." This is what my chair does for me. It holds me and tells me I'm okay, I can do anything anyone else can, go where they go, I can embrace the world, and yet be safe. Though I am not a lover of modern technology — for example, I would sooner write with a quill pen on parchment than on a computer — I am grateful I was born in the age of motorized chairs, for the inventions and designs, the mechanics who keep people like me moving outside when otherwise I would be stuck indoors, watching from the window, envying how "other people" live.

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